**HOW TO MAKE SENSE OF LIFE UNDER THE SUN**

Do you ever wonder whether animals ever think about the meaning of Life? I don’t think so. The search for the meaning and purpose of life is a uniquely human endeavour. From the beginning of time, man is on the quest for the meaning of life. Shakespeare, Confucius, Plato and many other so called wise men or philosophers from all cultures have given us their reflections on the meaning of life. The Bible records for us the search for meaning of life by one Hebrew wise man who calls himself ‘Ecclesiastes’. Ecclesiastes is not a personal name. It is a Greek word which means a convener or an assembler, someone who assembles people together to teach them much like a lecturer in a lecture hall or a teacher who assembles students together in a class room to teach them. The Hebrew equivalent of the Greek word Ecclesiastes is Qoheleth. It simply means, ‘Teacher’.

The Book of Ecclesiastes describes the quest for meaning of life by a Hebrew so called wise man. There was a time in the history of the Jewish people when there were many so called wise men. They went around spreading their reflections and teaching about the meaning of life and how to cope with life’s challenges. The author of Ecclesiastes warned his son of the dangers of many such speculative writings because some of their teachings are erroneous and contradictory to the Bible.

**Ecclesiastes 12:12 (ESV)
My son, beware of anything beyond these. Of making many books there is no end, and much study is a weariness of the flesh.**

**Who is the author of Ecclesiastes?**

Traditionally it was thought that Solomon was the author. However, many of the modern Bible scholars think that the author is not Solomon. Here are some of the reasons that cast doubts on Solomon as the author.

**Three reasons why Solomon may not be the author**

**1. The name of Solomon is not mentioned**

First, the name Solomon is not mentioned as the teacher, unlike Proverbs which specifically states that Solomon is the author.

**Proverbs 1:1 (NIV)
The proverbs of Solomon son of David, king of Israel:**

**2. Why was the past tense used – ‘was king over Israel’?**

If the teacher is Solomon, why did he say he was king over Israel in Jerusalem and not I am the king over Israel.

**Ecclesiastes 1:12 (NIV)
I, the Teacher, was king over Israel in Jerusalem.**

According to the biblical record, Solomon was king to the day of his death. There was never a time when he was dethroned.

Thirdly, the teacher seems to be critical of kingship.

**3. The teacher seems to speaks negatively of kingship.**

**Ecclesiastes 5:8-9 (NLT)
8 Don’t be surprised if you see a poor person being oppressed by the powerful and if justice is being miscarried throughout the land. For every official is under orders from higher up, and matters of justice get lost in red tape and bureaucracy. 9 Even the king milks the land for his own profit!**

If the teacher is indeed Solomon, why would he say such bad thing things about himself, oppressing the poor, turning a blind eye to the oppressive acts of the officials under him and worse still even he himself milks the land for his own profit!

There are other evidences that may cast doubt on Solomon as the author. Many Bible scholars today believe that the final author of the Book of Ecclesiastes is like an editor. He quotes the sayings of the teacher which constitute the main body of the book, 1:12-12:7.

**Ecclesiastes 1:2 (NIV)
“Meaningless! Meaningless!” says the Teacher. “Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless.”**

**Ecclesiastes 12:8 (NIV)
“Meaningless! Meaningless!” says the Teacher. “Everything is meaningless!”**

The person who wrote the Book of Ecclesiastes is telling his son that he is quoting the sayings of the teacher. They are not his opinions but the views of the wisdom teacher. He is telling his son that the wisdom teacher says everything is meaningless. Then at the concluding verses of the Book, 12:8-14, the editor evaluates the sayings of the teacher and tells his son his own view about life which is in accordance with the orthodox teaching of the Bible.

**Ecclesiastes 12:13-14 (NIV)
13 Now all has been heard; here is the conclusion of the matter: Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man. 14 For God will bring every deed into judgment, including every hidden thing, whether it is good or evil.**

So, according to this analysis of some Bible scholars, this is the structure of the Book.

1:1 -11 Prologue (introductory summary of the Teacher’s views) by the editor

1:12-12:7 Quotation of the sayings of the Teacher

12:8-14 Epilogue (concluding critique on the Teacher’s views) by the editor

However, it needs to be said that there are Bible scholars who believe that Solomon is the author. At the end of the day, it really does not matter who wrote the book. We can derive the same lesions from the Book of Ecclesiastes regardless of who actually wrote the Book.

**How do we interpret Ecclesiastes?**

The key to interpret Ecclesiastes is to remember the phrase used again and again by the teacher, ‘under the sun’ or ‘under heaven’.

**Ecclesiastes 1:13 (NIV)
I devoted myself to study and to explore by wisdom all that is done under heaven. What a heavy burden God has laid on men!**

The Chinese use the phrase, ‘under heaven’ – ‘Tien Xia’ to describe life under the sun. Example, under heaven, every party must come to an end. Similarly the conclusions drawn by the teacher is from someone whose perspective is under the sun. The teacher’s wisdom is wisdom under the sun. It’s not wisdom from God who is beyond the sun and is in heaven. It is wisdom that the teacher derived from experience and observations he made, without seeking revelation from God. It is human wisdom, discovered by the teacher himself. As a result, the conclusions of the teacher are sometimes true, sometimes half true and sometimes downright untrue. Sometimes he contradicts himself. The cult like the Jehovah’s witness based their doctrine about life after death from the erroneous teaching of the teacher and say that the soul has no consciousness after death.

**Ecclesiastes 9:5 (NIV)
For the living know that they will die, but the dead know nothing; they have no further reward, and even the memory of them is forgotten.**

This clearly contradicts the teaching of Jesus in his parable about the rich man and Lazarus.

So, why then did God include a book like Ecclesiastes in the Bible when it contains half truths and errors? It is to show us that truth and meaning of life can only be found from God’s revelation and not from human wisdom and philosophies. So, the way to read Ecclesiastes is to evaluate each statement of the teacher in the light of the rest of the Scriptures and especially in the light of the teachings of the New Testament. This we will proceed to do.

**A. THE CHARACTERISTICS OF LIFE UNDER THE SUN (1:1-11)**

Chapter 1:1-11 is the introduction of the thoughts of the teacher by the editor. He summarises the views of the teacher about life under the sun. What are the views of the teacher, who refers to himself as ‘son of David, king in Jerusalem’?

**1. Life is utterly meaningless.**

**Ecclesiastes 1:2 (NIV)
“Meaningless! Meaningless!” says the Teacher. “Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless.”**

The word translated as meaningless is translated as vanity in other versions. It carries the meaning of being futile and worthless. All human activities and labor are pointless and futile according to the Teacher.

**Ecclesiastes 1:3 (NLT)
What do people get for all their hard work under the sun?**

Nothing! At the end it is futile and pointless. The teacher then gives three reasons why life under the sun is meaningless.

**2. Life is wearisome because it goes around monotonously in a cycle.**

Life under the sun is just like nature that moves in a continuous cycle.

**Ecclesiastes 1:4-8 (NLT)
4 Generations come and generations go, but the earth never changes. 5 The sun rises and the sun sets, then hurries around to rise again. 6 The wind blows south, and then turns north. Around and around it goes, blowing in circles. 7 Rivers run into the sea, but the sea is never full. Then the water returns again to the rivers and flows out again to the sea. 8 Everything is wearisome beyond description. No matter how much we see, we are never satisfied. No matter how much we hear, we are not content.**

Those who are senior in the church can relate to this verse, ‘Generations come and generations go,”. Once you were kids. Then you grew up, settled down, had a career, raised up your children. Now your children too have grown up. Some have settled down, juggling between careers and parenting. You find yourselves busy helping in minding your grand children. By the time your grand children grow up it’s time for you to go. How true it is, ‘generations come and generations go.’

A Christian saw a woman crying at a bus stop and he asked her if he could be of any help. “Oh,” she replied, “I am just weary and bored. My husband is a hard worker, but he doesn’t earn as much as I want. So, I went to work. I get up early every morning, fix breakfast for our four children, pack lunches, and take a bus to my job. Then I return home for more drudgery, a few hours of sleep, and another day just like the one before. I guess I’m just sick of this endless routine.

History goes around in cycles. History repeats itself. There is nothing new under the sun according to the Teacher.

**Ecclesiastes 1:9-10 (NLT)
9 History merely repeats itself. It has all been done before. Nothing under the sun is truly new. 10 Sometimes people say, “Here is something new!” But actually it is old; nothing is ever truly new.**

All things are wearisome, more than one can say.

**3. Nothing really satisfies.**

**Ecclesiastes 1:8 (ESV)
All things are full of weariness; a man cannot utter it; the eye is not satisfied with seeing, nor the ear filled with hearing.**

**4. Life is brief.**

**Ecclesiastes 1:11 (NLT)
We don’t remember what happened in the past, and in future generations, no one will remember what we are doing now.**

Death is final. It erases all memories of you and your achievements. That is why life under the sun is so futile, so utterly meaningless. Kerry Packer was the richest man in Australia. He died some years ago. Now you hardly find any mention of him in the media. That is life under the sun when God is not in the equation.

**B. IN SEARCH OF MEANING OF LIFE UNDER THE SUN**

Chapter1:12 to Chapter 12:7 are the words of the Teacher which the editor/author quotes. The Teacher introduces himself and speaks in the first person, ‘I’. I, the Teacher, I applied my mind, I have seen all things under the heavens.

**Ecclesiastes 1:12 (NIV)
I, the Teacher, was king over Israel in Jerusalem.**

From this introduction of himself, one could infer that the Teacher may be Solomon. Many modern Bible scholars however believe that it’s not Solomon but a wisdom teacher who assumes the persona of Solomon. Some wisdom writers of those days wrote under the name of someone more famous than himself to draw conclusions about life and its meaning. Whether it’s actually Solomon or a wisdom teacher who spoke as if he was Solomon, it really does not change the message intended for the readers, that the quest for meaning of life under the sun will be futile as is demonstrated in the experience of Solomon in Chapter 1:12 to chapter 2. If Solomon with all his wisdom, power and resources fail to find meaning and satisfaction from life under the heavens, no one could.

**Ecclesiastes 2:12 (NLT)
So I decided to compare wisdom with foolishness and madness (for who can do this better than I, the king?).**

If King Solomon cannot find meaning of life under the sun, who can? Who can do better than the king?

So Solomon applied himself to search for meaning of life under the sun. Solomon searched for meaning in three areas of life under sun, wisdom, pleasure and work and found that it’s all in vain; it’s like chasing the wind, a futile activity.

**1. Searching for meaning in wisdom under the sun.**

**Ecclesiastes 1:13-18 (ESV)
13 And I applied my heart to seek and to search out by wisdom all that is done under heaven. It is an unhappy business that God has given to the children of man to be busy with. 14 I have seen everything that is done under the sun, and behold, all is vanity and a striving after wind. 15 What is crooked cannot be made straight, and what is lacking cannot be counted. 16 I said in my heart, “I have acquired great wisdom, surpassing all who were over Jerusalem before me, and my heart has had great experience of wisdom and knowledge.” 17 And I applied my heart to know wisdom and to know madness and folly. I perceived that this also is but a striving after wind. 18 For in much wisdom is much vexation, and he who increases knowledge increases sorrow.**

**a. God has created man with the need to find meaning.**

The Teacher was very focused in his search for meaning of life. He said, “I applied my heart to seek.” He recognized that human beings are wired to search for meaning. God has created us with the need to find meaning and purpose in life. It’s a universal quest. You see this search for meaning in every culture. The Teacher said,” **It is an unhappy business that God has given to the children of man to be busy with.”** This business to find meaning is from God.

**b. The reasons why human wisdom fails to find meaning.**

The Teacher said,” **It is an unhappy business that God has given to the children of man to be busy with.”** But it’s an unhappy business to be busy with because the world is crooked and we don’t have all the information to solve the puzzle of life.

**15 What is crooked cannot be made straight, and what is lacking cannot be counted.** There is something wrong with this world that we have no control over, such as death and man’s sinfulness which make the search for meaning futile. What is crooked cannot be made straight. Moreover, the world does not give us all the clues to solve the puzzle of life. Something is missing from this crooked world that renders the search for meaning futile. Solving the puzzle of life is like putting a jigsaw puzzle together. Two things to be able to put a jigsaw puzzle together. First, you need the picture of the finished work. Second you need all the pieces that make up the jigsaw puzzle. Only God who created us for a purpose can provide us with the final picture of what life is all about. Only God can give us all the clues about the meaning of life. Without the revelation from God, trying to solve the puzzle of life is doomed to failure. **15 What is crooked cannot be made straight, and what is lacking cannot be counted.** There is something lacking in human wisdom and endeavor. The most a human mind can do is to come out with more philosophies about life. But more philosophies raise more questions than answer them. That is why the Teacher’s search for wisdom under the sun ended in mental anguish.

He said, “**18 For in much wisdom is much vexation, and he who increases knowledge increases sorrow.”** Professors of philosophies themselves despair of finding meaning for their own personal lives.

A Christian was doing a doctoral thesis on postmodern thought in a University. One day he received a call from one of his professors who began to pour out to the student the pain and despair of his life. He couldn’t find meaning in life though he was a professor of philosophies. What was surprising is that he ended up asking the student for his prayers.

The example of the professor of philosophies shows that even though human wisdom cannot solve the puzzle of life, we still need common sense wisdom to deal with the obstacles and struggles of life, such as parenting, earning a living and other practical issues of daily living. That is why, wisdom is still better than folly.

**c. Wisdom under the sun is better than folly for this short life.**

**Ecclesiastes 2:13-14 (NIV)
13 I saw that wisdom is better than folly, just as light is better than darkness. 14 The wise man has eyes in his head, while the fool walks in the darkness; but I came to realize that the same fate overtakes them both.**

Light helps us to find our way through the challenges of life. So, we need practical wisdom to deal with day to day challenges of life. God has created us in his image, so we have been given wisdom even though this wisdom has been distorted by our alienation from God. That is why even people who do not know God show shrewdness in dealing with the affairs of the world. This is God’s mercy on all sinners, despite their rebellion against him, that he has not taken all wisdom from man. But ultimately, human wisdom has no answer to the question of eternity because of the certainty of death.

**d. Ultimately death makes wisdom under the sun worthless.**

**Ecclesiastes 2:15-16 (NIV)
15 Then I thought in my heart, “The fate of the fool will overtake me also. What then do I gain by being wise?” I said in my heart, “This too is meaningless.” 16 For the wise man, like the fool, will not be long remembered; in days to come both will be forgotten. Like the fool, the wise man too must die!**

So, in view of the certainty of death and the brevity of life, perhaps Solomon can find meaning through making the most of this short life by indulging himself in all kinds of pleasures.

**2. Searching for meaning in pleasures.**

**Ecclesiastes 2:1 (NLT)
I said to myself, “Come on, let’s try pleasure. Let’s look for the ‘good things’ in life.” But I found that this, too, was meaningless.**

These are the pleasures Solomon tried. First he tried laughter.

**Laughter.**

**Ecclesiastes 2:2 (NIV)
“Laughter,” I said, “is foolish. And what does pleasure accomplish?”**

May be having a good laugh may fill the emptiness of life. May be that is the reasons why comedy shows are popular even today. Yet, after the laughter, emptiness returns. The comedian actor Robin Williams made many people laugh in his shows but he himself was very unhappy. The shallowness of laughter is not a solution to the emptiness of a life lived without purpose or meaning. So, Solomon concluded, ‘Laughter is foolish. What does it accomplish? Then he tried wine.

**Wine**

**Ecclesiastes 2:3 (NIV)
I tried cheering myself with wine, and embracing folly—my mind still guiding me with wisdom. I wanted to see what was worthwhile for men to do under heaven during the few days of their lives.**

Was it worthwhile cheering himself with wine to counter the emptiness of life under the sun? No! Today people resort to other forms of drugs to overcome boredom – drugs, cigarettes, thrill seeking. Solomon then tried real estates, complete with servants.

**Big mansions, gardens, parks, and servants**

**Ecclesiastes 2:4-7a (NLT)
4 I also tried to find meaning by building huge homes for myself and by planting beautiful vineyards. 5 I made gardens and parks, filling them with all kinds of fruit trees. 6 I built reservoirs to collect the water to irrigate my many flourishing groves. 7 I bought slaves, both men and women, and others were born into my household.** Now he looked for pleasure in wealth.

**Wealth**

Many people seek to find satisfaction in life by acquiring great wealth for the sake of acquiring wealth. If they have made ten billions, they want to make it one hundred billions. Solomon was the richest man of his time. But his riches did not bring him meaning.

**Ecclesiastes 2:7b-8a (NLT)
7b I also owned large herds and flocks, more than any of the kings who had lived in Jerusalem before me. 8a I collected great sums of silver and gold, the treasure of many kings and provinces.**

Wine, women and songs, Solomon had tried them all.

**Women and Songs**

**Ecclesiastes 2:8b (NLT)
I hired wonderful singers, both men and women, and had many beautiful concubines. I had everything a man could desire!**

In the end, all these pleasures left him unsatisfied and empty.

**Ecclesiastes 2:10-11 (NIV)
10 I denied myself nothing my eyes desired; I refused my heart no pleasure. My heart took delight in all my work, and this was the reward for all my labor. 11 Yet when I surveyed all that my hands had done and what I had toiled to achieve, everything was meaningless, a chasing after the wind; nothing was gained under the sun.**

So wisdom under the sun is futile. Pleasures fail to satisfy. May work will provide meaning to life.

**3. Searching for meaning in work.**

The main reason Solomon found work to be meaningless is that one day soon you have to leave behind all that you have worked hard to achieve and accumulate to others when you die. There is no lasting reward for all your troubles, sleepless nights, sweat and stress. Someone else will enjoy the fruit of your labour. You will be forgotten. Nobody will thank you for all your hard work.

**Ecclesiastes 2:17-23 (NLT)
17 So I came to hate life because everything done here under the sun is so troubling. Everything is meaningless—like chasing the wind. 18 I came to hate all my hard work here on earth, for I must leave to others everything I have earned. 19 And who can tell whether my successors will be wise or foolish? Yet they will control everything I have gained by my skill and hard work under the sun. How meaningless! 20 So I gave up in despair, questioning the value of all my hard work in this world. 21 Some people work wisely with knowledge and skill, then must leave the fruit of their efforts to someone who hasn’t worked for it. This, too, is meaningless, a great tragedy. 22 So what do people get in this life for all their hard work and anxiety? 23 Their days of labor are filled with pain and grief; even at night their minds cannot rest. It is all meaningless.**

**C. What is the best thing a man can do if life has no meaning?**

**Ecclesiastes 2:24-25 (NLT)
24 So I decided there is nothing better than to enjoy food and drink and to find satisfaction in work. Then I realized that these pleasures are from the hand of God. 25 For who can eat or enjoy anything apart from him?**

That is what most people who do not know God’s purpose for their lives end up doing in their short lives on earth - eating, drinking, working, enjoying the simple pleasures of life. The Apostle Paul agrees that if life has no meaning because there is no resurrection, we might as well eat and drink.

**1 Corinthians 15:32b (NIV)
32b If the dead are not raised, “Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die.”**

**D. THE CHRISTIAN RESPONSE**

But God has called us to live beyond the sun. While we enjoy food and drink and work and thank God for these, we have a higher calling to fulfill. We are to seek first God’s kingdom and his righteousness. What is the Christian’s response to the Teacher’s reflections on life under the sun? We are called to live life beyond the sun.

This means, we are called to live before God in all areas of our lives.

**1. Everything we do is purpose driven and unto God.**

Everything we do, building a good marriage, parenting, grand parenting, work, ministry, even in enjoying food and drink and leisure, we are to do it all for the glory of God. The meaning and significance of our lives come from our relationship with a personal, covenant making God.

**2. In Christ we have a life that truly satisfies.**

Jesus said he came that we may have life and have it to the full. He came to give us a life that truly satisfies. In Christ, we shall thirst no more.

**3. The memory of us remains forever because we have eternal life.**

**John 17:3 (NIV)
Now this is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent.**

If you live life under the sun, there is no memory of you after you die. But if you know Christ, you live beyond the sun and you shall live forever in God’s presence.

**4. History is moving to a glorious end according to God’s time table.**

 The world sees history moving in an endless continuous cycle because the world does not know where it is heading. The Bible tells us that history is His story, God’s story. God is bringing history to a climax. Contrary to the view that there is nothing new, God is creating something all together new, ‘the new heaven and the new earth’ at the climax of history when Christ shall return.

**5. There is eternal reward for our labour in the Lord.**

At the end of history when Christ returns, we shall receive our eternal reward.

**1 Corinthians 15:58 (NIV)
Therefore, my dear brothers, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain.**

**6. God is creating something wonderfully new.**

For us, Christians, the best is yet to come. God has kept in store for you something wonderful, way beyond your wildest imagination.

**1 Peter 1:4 (NLT)
and we have a priceless inheritance—an inheritance that is kept in heaven for you, pure and undefiled, beyond the reach of change and decay.**

**1 Corinthians 2:9 (NLT)
That is what the Scriptures mean when they say, “No eye has seen, no ear has heard, and no mind has imagined what God has prepared for those who love him.”**

Life is not as the Teacher lamented, a continuous cycle, going nowhere. On the contrary, God is moving history to a glorious climax when we shall be amazed by the new things that God have prepared for us who love him. So, let us not grow weary in doing good and let us live life purposeful, unto the Lord, seizing every opportunity for the gospel and to do good, looking at life beyond the sun, from God’s perspective, with hope and excitement and expectation. The end is sooner than we think.